

## **The Harpsichord**

The harpsichord at St. Francis is a small single-manual instrument, on long-term loan from George Taylor, a principal owner of Taylor and Boody Organbuilders in Staunton. It started its life in the late 1960s as a personal project of organ builder John Brombaugh in Gloucester, Massachusetts under the tutelage of noted harpsichord builder Frank Hubbard. The instrument is scratch-built, not assembled from a kit and not using any pre-made wooden parts. It's design was copied from a 16<sup>th</sup> century instrument built by Hans Ruckers, which is in the Belle Skinner Collection of Musical Instruments at Yale. It differs from that harpsichord in that plywood was used in parts of the case, instead of all solid wood as in the original. The soundboard, however, is made of spruce.

In 1970 Brombaugh opened his own organ building shop in Ohio, bringing the unfinished harpsichord with him. George Taylor was one of several business partners in the Brombaugh firm there. The case of the instrument languished for many years in the dusty corners of Brombaugh's workshop, without keyboard, strings, or action. At one point Brombaugh painted the case garish orange and blue, inspired by street art he had seen in Venice. He subsequently regretted the choice. Traces of it can still be found in several spots where the current color has worn off. For years the instrument faced an uncertain future. Eventually Brombaugh realized he would not have time to complete it and sold the shell to Taylor, who set about to make it into a functioning harpsichord. He built the keyboard from scratch and fashioned other parts needed for it to play. He also had the soundboard decorated by his friend, Debbie Gill. Other harpsichord-building friends contributed advice and help to the project, including Keith Hill and Anderson DuPree. Later, after bringing it to Virginia in 1977, Taylor purchased strings, jacks, and tuning pins from the harpsichord builder Willard Martin of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, who wisely repainted the case in the dark red/dark green colors with gold banding that we see today. Among notable musicians who have played the instrument in Staunton was Amsterdam harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt.

The original design called for the harpsichord to have two sets (choirs) of strings, one playing at 8' pitch (the same as a piano) and the other playing at 4' pitch (an octave higher). This was changed to two sets of 8' strings, resulting in a much more useful instrument. The two choirs can be turned on and off, providing some control of volume and sound color. Provisions for the original 4' choir can still be seen in the instrument: bridge, nut, and tuning-pin holes are still there, waiting for strings which never came.

## **How It Came to Us**

The harpsichord spent many happy years in the Taylor household, but eventually it came to serve more as a table than a musical instrument. George offered to loan it to me if I could use it to make music again, and so I brought it to St. Francis. Several years of disuse required some repairs, which I have recently undertaken (my summer job in college was in a harpsichord shop). There is more to do, but soon I will have it back to its full potential.

During the Covid-19 era, when limited public masses resumed, I brought the harpsichord up to the organ loft so that I could play it without needing to go to the front of the church. Its usefulness as a solo and as an accompanimental instrument is now being fulfilled, as George had hoped!

*-Christopher Bono, Director of Music, June 2020*

## Technical Specifications

Disposition: 2x8', stop levers at treble end above wrestplank

Compass: BB-c'', 51 notes; transposable A = 440, 415

Dimensions: Length, 64"; Width, 30"; Depth of case, 9"

Weight: About 55 lbs.

Action: Single manual with boxwood naturals and arcades; ebony sharps

Brown Delrin jacks by Willard Martin, with bottom adjusting screws

White Delrin plectra, slowly being replaced with black Selcon

The harpsichord is not a touch-sensitive instrument; pressing the key harder does not produce a louder sound as it does in the piano. Also, there is no sustain pedal as in the piano. To hold a note, the key must be held down as with the organ, making the technique for playing the harpsichord much closer to organ than to piano technique.